

# A toast to your bad elf

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

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It being the season of joyous bouncy jollification and goodwill, I thought we could take a look at a festive nugget of holiday cheer that will warm the cockles of your retro-gaming heart and soul.

Santa's Xmas Caper as it was known for its 1992 Amiga outing (and *seemingly* identical 1993 DOS port) was originally an 8-bit horizontally scrolling shoot 'em up released in 1991 for the 48k Speccy, Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64 - an entirely different game to this platformer. Regardless, all versions were published under the Zeppelin Games (now known as Eutechnyx) banner, albeit by different development teams.



*Hang on a minute, if Santa has Rudolph's nose, how does he smell? Flippin' awful! - the shower's on the blink and he's been working his antlers off all night.*

In the original escapade, playing as the rotund beardy bloke himself, we find ourselves battling against an elfin rebellion force hell-bent on ruining Christmas for all the ickle boys and girls waiting expectantly for their Tomy LCD games and Barbie dolls to arrive.

Not satisfied with spiking Santa's Christmas pudding with intoxicating wine causing him to pass out, the wayward critters take to the skies in pilfered toys relishing every opportunity to pelt you - his substitute - with crackers and sink plungers (?) as we swoop through a snow-capped wintry Wonderland from Lapland, across the Atlantic Ocean to England, poised precariously on our Rudolph-powered sleigh.



*Santa would often go into hiding during the making of this game... he suffers from low elf esteem.*

En route you're harassed by penguins, steam trains, bouncing balls and rubber ducks... it's totally quackers! Think 'Attack of the Mutant Camels' with a frosty Christmas coating.

Originally previewed as 'You Are Santa Claus' - most likely due to a misinterpretation of the full title which features an 'in' in the middle - the ZX Spectrum version was the work of Ian Richards and John Cassells. As was often the case, the code was ported from the Amstrad incarnation and so both games are extremely similar.



*It's probably for the best that Amstrad Santa couldn't fit down the chimney... no-one wants to wake up on Christmas morning to find a Krisp Kringle in the hearth!*

John Menzies, Boots et al stocked Santa's Xmas Caper at £3.99, landing it squarely in the premium range budget, middle ground oddity category Codemasters popularised. When first introduced it was expected to sell for £2.99, which is still a whole whopping British pound more than many bargain-basement titles would have cost.

Reflective Designs took charge of the Commodore 64 iteration; a team comprising coder Duncan Scott Kershaw (who went on to become a prolific games producer and

project manager, and now works as a development director, most recently overseeing the Hard Rain team), Tynebase Computer Design taking care of the graphics, and musician, Mark Wilson.



*Santa's Commodore jaunt kicks off with a "ready, set, ho! ho! ho!"*

Graphics and coding over in the parallel universe of Sir Alan's pre-Apprentice Amstrad playground were courtesy of 'The Gimmer Brothers', who as it happens aren't brothers *or* called Gimmer. The people responsible are in fact the same ones who produced the Speccy edition, although they aren't individually credited in either game oddly enough.



*Norma Jean's happy feet were unanimously voted 'best in snow' for the third year running... while Memphis took home the rosette for 'most impressive plunger-nose'.*

The Spectrum and Amstrad editions kick-off to a 'differently tuned' rendition of We Wish You a Merry Christmas. It's certainly not *out* of tune; perish the thought! An entirely deliberate artistic reinterpretation of the traditional, original piece, I'm sure. Oh AY chip, oh AY chip, how lovely are your blippy beeps.



*Luckily Speccy Santa doesn't suffer from Claus-trophobia!*

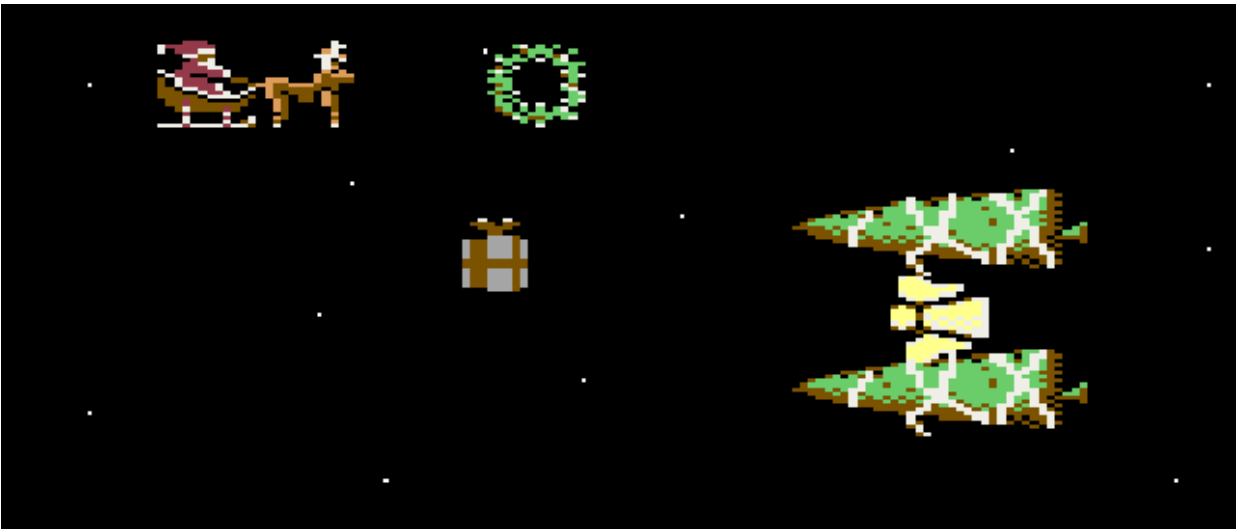
Aside from the standard-issue ballistics, satellite dishes fire radar beams at our unseen protagonist (maybe he's ducking down inside his sleigh, or the artist ran out of time to pencil him in, who knows?), and having learnt nothing from the grandmaster of gift-giving logistics, you collect wine glasses for extra points.

Just say no to drink-sleighbing kids! Any other time, fill your boots! "To alcohol! The cause of... and solution to... all of life's problems."

At the end of each level you face a super-sized snowman (followed by a jubilant chorus of Silent Night), a reindeer (his defeat rousing Good King Wenceslas from his post-Christmas alming shenanigans), and ultimately, Santa himself (whose signature tune is We Three Kings of Orient Are), which of

course is perfectly logical because, erm... he's your black sheep doppelganger nemesis, just like in Superman IV. Yep, that'll be it. We are often our own worst enemy.

Incidentally, the mega villain is sprite-swapped with a couple of pressie chucking Christmas trees in the Commodore 64 version. In fact, the latter is a far superior production in every way - much more worthy of the Mintery allusion.



*That's a tree-mendous idea for a boss battle... although you could argue that attacking Santa is tantamount to tree-son.*

The funky SID chip remixes of popular Christmas carols and the recently late Greg Lake's I Believe in Father Christmas, complete with apologies to the original composers (Handel and Prokofiev) had me grinning like a gormless Muppet. Plus, Santa - well, us wearing his suit if you were paying attention to the plot - takes his rightful place aboard the



Saintnickmobile. Cherrying the cake, the reindeer's running motion and even the bobble on our hat is nicely animated. Aww, who's a cute little Santa? Yes you are.

The 8-bit versions were variously received with everything from lampooning, sniffy disgust to glowing - albeit tampered - praise.

Amstrad Action were the most hostile, 'awarding' it a bah humbugly 6% in December 1991 and branding it "pathetic", while Zzap!64 in January 1992 swung to the opposite end of the spectrum pegging it at 79%.

Commodore Force weren't quite so charitable, dishing up a 46% bottom line in February 1993. Why were they reviewing a Christmas game in February anyway? They'd be daydreaming about their summer beach holidays by then.



*Santa could whip the stuffing out of these poultry upstarts.*

Likewise, the Speccy adjudicators didn't exactly roll out the red carpet when they gave Caper the once over in January 1992. A mediocre 64% was Sinclair User's verdict, while Your Sinclair deemed it deserving of no more than a miserly 14%. Tidings of comfort and joy to you too!



*Olaf turned to Frosty and quipped, "do you smell carrots?" Santa clapped him on the back, belly-laughed heartily and belted out a chorus of "freeze a jolly good fellow!" In synchrony, they exclaimed, "jolly hockey sticks", and flew back to Santa's place for eggnog and mince pies.*

Honesty and journalistic integrity are all well and good, but come on, it's Christmas! A time to smile at complete strangers on the street, and go all dewy-eyed looking at puppies wearing Santa hats. Would it have killed you to lie a

bit? Just a smidgen? You probably ruined Zeppelin's Christmas you heartless Scroogemongers.

An Amigaified version ('tis the season to neologise, tralalalala lalala) was gifted the following year, priced at a very reasonable £7.99, and credited to The Chief Elf (coding) and Ted E. Bear (graphics).

While I'm no expert in onomastics, I suspected that these aren't, in fact, the developers' real names. Anticipating an epic conspiracy story I set about investigating the true identities of the forsaken duo and the reasons behind the shocking cover-up.



*There's no business like snow business. Alright, I'll call it quits now. This is snow joke.*

I knew through reading around the subject that the teddy in question is David 'Tink' Taylor, though had to ask who his elf accomplice was.

"Santa's Christmas Capers! That's a blast from the past. I've not seen that running for over 20 years... I've checked my copy of the game - still in its original box - and Ian Copeland is credited as the programmer with me as the graphic artist in the enclosed instruction leaflet. I'm not sure why our names aren't shown elsewhere (in the game for instance). Ian mustn't have put them in. I'll have to have words with him next time I see him!

I'd forgotten about the Chief Elf (Ian) and Ted E. Bear (me) credit in the game... I suspect it was me who came up with those. I'm not sure that Ian would naturally call himself Chief Elf!

I'm still amazed that something I worked on is still being referenced nearly 25 years later. And yes, it is a bit Marmite!"

Ah, just an oversight then. A shame really as it had all the hallmarks of an intriguing X-Files episode.

The manual has yet to be scanned and uploaded to the usual haunts, yet the text *has* been reproduced online. Close your eyes and imagine Morgan Freeman's grandfatherly sophic inflection as he orates the plot...

## **A Christmas Tale**

Tell us a story, the wide-eyed chorus. The old woman settles into her ancient ebony rocking chair and smiles

mysteriously, staring through the cabin's thick bottle windows at the confetti snow outside, she begins to weave a magic tale...

It is Christmas eve and the fairy lights dance. Tucked up in bed, the good children wake as the hall clock strikes twelve. On a table, mince pies, some sherry and hay, but where is Santa? For the stockings hang empty.

In the shivering cold of the arctic wasteland, past snow-heavy pine and solid ice lakes. Santa's toy laden sled skims through the night. Then disaster! a reindeer stumbles and the sleigh overturns. Toys scatter this way and that, what's to be done?... Santa looks crestfallen. All the good children will be disappointed.

Full marks for making the effort to set the scene (and for use of the word 'crestfallen' in a kid's game!) - an atmospheric introduction with echos of a traditional bedtime story. It brings a tear to my eye! \*sniff\*

It's worth noting that the only version of the 8-bit games to include a plot is the Commodore 64. In the others you're jostled straight into the inexplicable action and it all feels a bit disjointed.



*Somehow I don't think the Elf and Safety Commission would approve.*

This is where you, Amigan hero supremo, step up to the plate to save the day. It's your duty to traverse the skiddy rooftop death traps to round up the presents strewn across the urban landscape, avoiding a motley crew of nasties as you go along.

This novel menagerie include roast turkey copters, bouncing perfume bottles, circling anthropomorphic 'Al Kaseltser' pills (for your hangover, geddit?), rocket-boosted Christmas cake slices, Nobby the Penguin, and Jelly Foraftas ('afters' being slang for dessert in certain parts of the UK). Those spiky fences aren't exactly your best buddy either.



*Order of billing flies out the window when the cast return for an encore.*

You can't actually bump off any of these opponents what with there being a serial killing embargo in effect for the festive period. Instead, you must freeze them to the spot with your snowballs long enough to swerve their deadly wrath.

Lose a life and you reanimate with a temporary bubble invincibility shield enveloping your portly self, allowing you to get straight back into the groove without succumbing to the same foe.



*Santa submitted his Christmas retro console wish list to his dyslexic parents nice and early... but still ended up with this pony sleigh station instead!*

Beginning the game we're greeted by a charmingly vibrant, cartoony title screen leading into an endearing animated snow vista, all accompanied by a jazzed-up rendition of the Christmas carol classic, Deck the Halls.

In-game the action itself is showered with Christmassy knick-knacks and delicacies, some of which are very reminiscent of Robocod's scenery (the fruit cake and chocolate squares especially). The jelly, mince pies, chicken drumsticks, sweets, crackers, snowflakes, baubles, trees, candles and



decorations, all drawn in a goofy comic book caricature style, can't fail to kick into touch your jaded inner Grinch.



Against the backdrop of a gradient sky, the deliciously chintzy montage consummately sets the mood, helping to explain why Santa and his present-scouring Caper is so fondly remembered, even by those of us who weren't blown away by the frustrating, limited gameplay.

Our usual cynicism is often sent packing to hiatusville at this time of the year as the warm glow of optimism, nostalgia and sentimental reflection take precedence. If booting up one of the Caper games helps to tip the balance then surely it's entitled to an official place on the Christmas cheeseboard alongside Cliff, Wham, Wizzard and Noddy.

For the lactose intolerant amongst you, there's always alcoholic stupor. Merry oblivion one and all! \*

\*Everything Amiga does not endorse alcoholism. Any comments suggesting otherwise are a result of uncontrollable comedic genius. Remember to drink sensibly, buy a cup of hot soup for a homeless person and hug a donkey.